

Reevaluating the Marine Corps Recruiting Standards

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Proper enlistment and screening and job placement are prerequisites for efficiencies in training, retention of skilled personnel, and mission performance. Any deficiencies in the selection and classification system lead to increased training times and cost, dissatisfied personnel with concomitant decreases in morale, productivity, and retention, and critical shortages of skills caused by failure to achieve optimal assignment of available manpower into the various occupations.

-A Department of Defense report to Congress (DoD, 1981a, p. 5)

Marine Corps recruiting has always been a daunting task, but four new potential recruiting pitfalls are now threatening the fabric of the Corps. First, the Marine Corps is currently accepting the most uneducated recruits of all the service branches in order to meet recently increased enlistment goals. Second, potential recruits show less interest in joining the military now than any other time in recent history. Another potential shortfall is the undereducated minority groups that are continuously targeted to meet recruiters' quotas. Finally, the Marine Corps has had to lower not only its educational standards, but its moral standards as well. In order to meet the technological demands of today's battlefield while maintaining its principles, the Marine Corps needs to reevaluate its recruiting standards.

History of Screening

The Army leadership realized the importance of aptitude and education screening during World War I. Subsequently, the Army's Alpha and Bravo tests were developed primarily to judge the new recruits' potential ability and for job placement purposes. By World War II, the test had been improved and was renamed the Army General Classification Test (AGCT). After the war, every service had its own aptitude test, but every test had the same content, so in 1948 a working group was formed to develop a



uniform aptitude test that met certain criteria agreed upon by all the services. What was created in 1950 became known as the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT). This test was used as a screening device to measure "general mental ability to absorb military training within a reasonable length of time" and "potential general usefulness in the service, if qualified on the tests."¹

In order to increase efficiency, the Department of Defense developed the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) in 1976, which combined qualification and classification testing. This multiple choice test improved the ability to match applicants with available job positions and allowed guaranteed occupational specialties for the qualified applicants.² Of the nine subsets of the ASVAB, four are used to determine eligibility for enlistment and are referred to as the modern day AFQT. These four subsets are arithmetic reasoning, mathematics knowledge, paragraph comprehension, and word knowledge. The AFQT scores represent a person's trainability as compared to the general youth population and are compiled as percentiles. Therefore a score of 75% represents an applicant doing better

¹ Sheila Kirby, *Enlisted Personnel Management: A Historical Perspective* (Santa Monica: Rand Corp, 1996)

² Kirby, *Enlisted Personnel Management*

than 75% of the test-takers. Six categories are used to further divide the scores as shown in Figure 1.³

Tier and Mental Group Definitions			
			
 Number of accessions is unconstrained			
Tier	Who Qualifies?	Mental Group	AFQT Scores
Tier I	High School Diploma Graduates (HSDGs)	Cat. I	AFQT ≥ 93
	Adult Education Diploma, Completed 1 Semester College	Cat. II	65 ≤ AFQT < 93
Tier II	GEDs, Home School, National Guard Youth Challenge Program Graduates, Certificate of Attendance, etc.	Cat. IIIA	50 ≤ AFQT < 65
		Cat. IIIB	31 ≤ AFQT < 50
		Cat. IVA	21 ≤ AFQT < 31
Tier III	Non-HSDGs	Cat. IVB & C	10 ≤ AFQT < 21

Meeting the Minimums

The first three categories of the AFQT shown in figure 1 are typically viewed as high quality scores and have no limitations for eligibility. While category V, those scoring less than ten, typically read at the 5th to 7th grade levels and are excluded from military service.

³ Kirby, *Enlisted Personnel Management*

The National Defense Authorization Act of 1981 limits the proportion of Category IV recruits to twenty percent.⁴ It also mandates that those individuals without a high school diploma score a minimum of thirty one on the AFQT which is equivalent to at least category IIIB.⁵ Currently, a high school diploma is desirable, but not required for service entry. However category IV recruits must be high school diploma graduates. Moreover, every service places an additional minimum AFQT for enlistment consideration. The Army's minimum is thirty one, the Marine's is thirty two, the Navy standard is thirty five, and the Air Force and Coast Guard are thirty six.⁶

The Department of Defense mandated in DoDI 1145.01, dated 20 September 2005, that no more than four percent of an accession cohort can be Category IV, sixty percent must be Category IIIA or better, and ninety percent of all accessions must be Tier I. The Marine Corps has raised the bar further to limit category IV active duty accessions to one percent and requires ninety five percent of accessions to be Tier 1. However, these figures can be improved upon as the Air Force has

⁴ Kirby, *Enlisted Personnel Management*

⁵ Dana L. Bookshire, Anita U. Hattiangadi, and Catherine M. Hiatt, *Emerging Issues in USMC Recruiting: Assessing the Success of Cat. IV Recruits in the Marine Corps*. (Alexandria, Virginia: CNA Corporation, August 2006)

⁶Wikipedia. December 10, 2008. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ASVAB> (accessed December 10, 2008).

already proven with their exemplary standard of ninety nine percent Tier 1.⁷

The Center for Naval Analysis (CNA) conducted an assessment of the success of Category IV recruits in the Marine Corps in 2006 and found the Marines accepted the highest percentage of Category IIIB recruits of all the services in the year 2004. This was the first time since 1995 that the Marine Corps has led all services in this unimpressive category. This grouping is the bottom half of test takers scoring from thirty one to fifty on the AFQT. 30.5% of Marine Corps recruits in 2004 were in this bottom category. Once again, the Air Force currently sets the standard having only eighteen percent of their recruits in this bottom category.⁸ The Corps is being drained by these poorly educated recruits and this issue is easily resolved by simply not accepting poor performers.

Doing More With Less

Another major problem recruiters are facing is that there are fewer young men to select from. According to several DOD surveys, interest among young men in joining the Marines is at its lowest point in history, currently at eight percent.⁹ One of

⁷ Bookshire, Hattiangadi and Hiatt, *Emerging Issues in USMC Recruiting*.

⁸ Bookshire, Hattiangadi and Hiatt, *Emerging Issues in USMC Recruiting*.

⁹ Andrew Tilghman, "Tough times for today's recruiters." *Marine Corps Times*, April 14, 2008.

the largest contributors to this generation's lack of military interest is the large number of young people who attend college.

Andrew Tilghman, a journalist for the Marine Corps Times, wrote an article in November 2008 about how difficult it is to recruit in this day and age. The main point of his article is that today's quality of recruit is declining. He furthermore describes that recruiters are handing out more waivers than ever before as the standards of education are lower than they were years ago. Mr. Tilghman states, "For the troops in uniform, that means the new cohort of youngsters coming out of boot camp may have more health and disciplinary problems and more trouble quickly learning the skills needed to perform today's missions."¹⁰

Richard Kohn, a military historian at the University of North Carolina, claims, "There is almost no end to the ingenuity of the Pentagon in attracting people. And if push comes to shove, we will simply lower the requirements." One of Kohn's main concerns however is that tomorrow's recruits may not be as good as those in recent years." Kohn goes on to say, "We've gone through a 20-year period when we've had a very high quality in the American force," he said. "Maybe [military leaders] are going to have to learn to live with a force that is less capable coming in. Maybe they're going to have to learn to live with a

¹⁰ Tilghman, "Tough times for today's recruiters."

force that costs more in terms of training." If the Marine Corps priority is *quantity* during this time of war and meeting new recruitment goals because of the surge, then considerable effort must go into weighing the risk of meeting those goals at the expense of *quality* recruits. Peter Singer, head of the 21st Century Defense Initiative at the Brookings Institute, a Washington think tank, said it best, "There is a battle for talent in the 21st century. Finite resources are not just oil and natural gas. It's also human capital – human talent. And the military is going to have to be out there battling for it."¹¹

Significantly lowering recruiting standards would not be out of the question. Historically, our military has relaxed standards for enlistment during times of war to facilitate the larger number of troops needed. World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam were all examples of when the military lowered their standards to meet the minimum enlistment goals.¹² Recent facts and figures show that the United States is content to lower the standards to dangerously low levels to meet the expansion goals set forth by the Secretary of Defense to continue to fight the Global War on Terror.

In 2007, Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced plans to expand the military by 92,000 Soldiers and Marines by the year

¹¹ Tilghman, "Tough times for today's recruiters."

¹² Kirby, *Enlisted Personnel Management*

2011. The Marines will increase their numbers by 27,000 and are currently already two years ahead of schedule, hoping to reach that goal in early 2009. The goal for the end of fiscal year 2007 was 184,000 Marines, but the Marine Corps' strength was actually 186,500. The goal for 2008 was 189,000, but the Marines actually ended the fiscal year with 198,000. In fiscal year 2008, the Army signed up 80,517 new troops, while the Marines signed up 37,991.¹³ Because the Marine Corps is ahead of its expansion schedule, adjusting priorities from quantity to quality should be the focus.

Targeting Marines, Not Quotas

With the current expansion pressing recruiters even harder than before to meet quotas, recruiters are now targeting lower-middle class minority groups from places with limited economic opportunities. However, targeting underprivileged minority groups is not a new practice. In 1996, Hispanics made up 11.2% of the population, but only 6.9% of the military. The Marine Corps made a concerted effort to recruit more Hispanics to balance what they called an "underrepresentation." The only

¹³ Yochi J. Dreazen, "Marine Corps Speeds Ahead on Growth." *Wall Street Journal*, December 6, 2008: A 5.

problem with that drive was that only fifty five percent of Hispanics had a high school diploma.¹⁴

In 1996, African Americans made up twelve percent of the nation's population, while representing twenty two percent of the military's population. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) classifies this overrepresentation as racial targeting. As with Hispanics, only seventy five percent of African Americans had a high school diploma. These staggering numbers have not changed much from the previous decade and the undereducated minority groups continue to be targeted according to several ACLU reports.¹⁵ Recruiting from minority groups to better represent the population is not a bad notion. Targeting the uneducated, regardless of race, is where the problems arise.

Maintaining Our Moral Standards

Not only are we loosening our academic standards for recruits, we are lowering our moral standards as well. The Marine Corps allowed sixty eight percent more convicted felons into their ranks in 2007 than they did the previous year. This includes individuals convicted of armed robbery, arson,

¹⁴ Sherwood Ross, "www.opednews.com." *www.opednews.com*. November 30, 2008. <http://www.opednews.com/articles/Pentagon-Recruiters-Target-by-Sherwood-Ross-081130-674.html> (accessed December 4, 2008).

¹⁵ Andrea Stone, "Military recruiters target underrepresented Hispanics." *USA Today*, January 21, 1999: 5 A.

burglary, kidnapping, making terroristic threats, rape or sexual abuse, and committing indecent acts or liberties with a child. In 2007, 350 recruits had felony convictions on their records, up from 208 the previous year. Recruits convicted of burglary also rose to 142 from 90, and those who had committed aggravated assault increased to 44 from 35. The Chairman of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Representative Henry A. Waxman said, "It raises concerns. An increase in the recruitment of individuals with criminal records is a result of the strains put on the military by the Iraq war and may be undermining our military readiness."¹⁶ Senior military officials are quick to point out that only a small percentage, about two percent, of Marine recruits require a criminal waiver. Major General Milstead, the Marine Corp's top recruiting chief, said, "the Marine Corps granted waivers to 46% of its recruits in fiscal 2008." Most of these waivers were for drug use however and not felony charges.¹⁷ One could argue that General Milstead does not alleviate concern by saying forty four percent of the Corps is currently serving on drug waivers. There is no reason for the Marine Corps to compromise its fundamental principles by allowing so many moral waivers each year.

¹⁶ Lizette Alvarez, "Army and Marine Corps grant more felony waivers." *New York Times*, April 22, 2008

¹⁷ William H. McMichael, "Shaky economy helps recruiting, retention." *Marine Corps Times*, October 14, 2008.

Counterargument

Not everyone in the United States is concerned with the quality of our recruits. James Jay Carafano of the Washington, D.C. Heritage Foundation claims, "The enlistment of lower-scoring and less-educated people is not a cause for worry." He believes people make too much of the argument that more educated and higher scoring recruits make better soldiers. In some situations, he claims, there is nothing better than having sheer numbers on the ground regardless of their education levels.¹⁸

As the recent quality of recruit has been slipping, there is hope in the very near future to turn this trend around. History reveals that during times of economic hardship, many individuals who would not have considered the military as an occupation in better times are walking through recruiters' doors ready to enlist. With a larger pool of potential recruits, the military services will enjoy higher quality recruits, if only for a short period of time until the economy rebounds. Calculating the effect of the current financial crisis on recruitment is premature according to some military recruiters; however, just as before, they expect the weak economy to help

¹⁸ Dogen Hannah, "Armed Forces face challenge filling ranks in time of war: Some concerned military sacrificing quality for quantity by lowering enlistment standards." *Tribune Business News*, March 18, 2007: 1.

their efforts. Lt Col. Mike Zeliff, the assistant Chief of Staff for Marketing and Recruiting is quoted as saying, "The economy is probably making more people think about other options, and we're probably benefiting from that."¹⁹

Conclusion

Combat power is no longer measured by how many men are dressed in uniforms on the field of battle. The Marine Corps' edge comes from its superior technological war machines and those highly skilled and trained minds driving them. As technology continues to advance, the Corps' fighting men and women must advance with it. Instead of lowering the recruiting criteria, the Corps should reevaluate the standards to ensure the most capable and qualified individuals this country has to offer are the ones being enlisted.

¹⁹ Dreazen, "Marine Corps Speeds Ahead on Growth."

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